

2008

# Looking towards Asia: an analysis of Australian Asian-themed postgraduate tourism dissertations

Gary Lacey  
*Monash University*

Betty Weiler  
*Monash University*

Jennifer Laing  
*Monash University*

---

## Publication details

Postprint of: Lacey, G, Weiler, B & Laing, J 2008, 'Looking towards Asia: an analysis of Australian Asian-themed postgraduate tourism dissertations', in J Jenkins (ed.), *Developing and delivering industry-relevant education and research: Proceedings of the 2008 6th Asia-Pacific CHRIE (ApacCHRIE) Conference in association with THE-ICE International Panel of Experts Forum*, Perth, WA, 21-24 May, Australian School of Tourism & Hotel Management. ISBN: 9780646493565

ePublications@SCU is an electronic repository administered by Southern Cross University Library. Its goal is to capture and preserve the intellectual output of Southern Cross University authors and researchers, and to increase visibility and impact through open access to researchers around the world. For further information please contact [epubs@scu.edu.au](mailto:epubs@scu.edu.au).

# **LOOKING TOWARDS ASIA: AN ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIAN ASIAN-THEMED POSTGRADUATE TOURISM DISSERTATIONS**

Gary Lacey, Betty Weiler, Jennifer Laing  
Tourism Research Unit, Monash University

## **CITE AS:**

Lacey, G.; Weiler, B.; Laing, J. (2008) 'Looking towards Asia: An analysis of Australian Asian-themed postgraduate tourism dissertations.' In John Jenkins, Editor. *Developing and Delivering Industry-Relevant Education and Research: Proceedings of the 2008 6th Asia-Pacific CHRIE (ApacCHRIE) Conference in association with THE-ICE International Panel of Experts Forum 2008*, Perth, Australia.

## **ABSTRACT**

Australia is increasingly focusing on the Asian region, including the export of education and research, and the field of tourism is illustrative of this focus and growth. Aside from the large number of Asian students who are attracted to undergraduate and postgraduate coursework tourism programs in Australia, there has been a notable growth in the number of Asian students enrolling in and completing higher degree (masters and PhD) research qualifications, as well as increasing interest by both local and international students in undertaking Asian-themed tourism research. The aim of this paper is to report and critically evaluate trends and patterns in Asian-themed Australian higher degree tourism research dissertations as evidence of the contribution to knowledge about tourism in Asia and the preparation of academics, researchers and scholars who can teach and conduct Asian-themed tourism research. An analysis of Australian tourism dissertations illustrates that studies in the field of business, and especially economics and marketing, have been the main focus of Asian-themed tourism research, with a number of disciplines and topics having been largely or wholly neglected. Patterns vary for individual countries, and the paper draws on socio-demographic trends and government policy to explain these as well as the more macro patterns and trends.

## **INTRODUCTION AND AIM OF STUDY**

As one of the major exporters of tertiary tourism education to the Asian region, Australia's interest in, and potential for, capacity-building in this region are uncontested (Tran, 2008). Aside from the large and growing numbers of Asian students who are attracted to undergraduate and postgraduate coursework tourism programs in Australia, anecdotally there are growing numbers of Asian students enrolling in and completing higher degree (masters and PhD) research qualifications. To date, the contributions of this tertiary-level research to Asian tourism and to capacity-building in Asia's tertiary institutions have not been investigated. The aim of this paper is to report and critically evaluate trends and patterns in Asian-themed higher degree research theses as evidence of the contribution of postgraduate research conducted in Australian universities to knowledge about tourism in Asia and to the preparation of academics, researchers and scholars who can teach and do research in tourism.

Following a review of previous studies that have examined trends in postgraduate tourism research, the paper outlines the approach and methods used in the present study and the limitations of these methods. This is followed by presentation and interpretation of the

findings, first with respect to topic, then discipline, then trends over time, and finally with respect to the ethnicity of the author of the thesis. The paper concludes by highlighting the implications of the patterns and gaps in Asian-themed tourism research including avenues for further research.

## **REVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES ON TOURISM AS THE SUBJECT OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH**

This study continues in the vein of two similar studies of dissertation trends over time conducted nearly twenty years ago, but with a view to taking a more comprehensive and critical look at both the factors that influence dissertation trends and patterns and the implications of these for future tourism research and education in Asia. Jafari and Ascher (1988) analysed a dataset of American tourism doctoral dissertations over the period 1951 to 1987, 1951 being the date when the first tourism dissertation was identified by their search of the *Dissertation Abstracts Online* computer database. They found that growth over this period “was neither continuous nor at a certain rate” (Jafari and Ascher 1988: 410), but that the overall trend was positive from the early 1970s to 1987. The discipline which granted the degree was tracked over time, and it was found that most tourism dissertations were in the field of economics (26%), closely followed by anthropology (16%), geography (15%) and recreation (15%).

Jafari and Ascher (1988: 414) called for their study to be replicated in other parts of the world, so that the comparative data could be used “as an indication of the present status of tourism on doctoral campuses and its likely future”. Hall and Pedrazzini’s (1989) study of Australian higher degree theses in tourism, recreation and related subjects was undertaken in response to this and used a combination of paper-based and on-line searching via the catalogue of the University of Tasmania Library, including their *Union List of Higher Degree Theses in Australian Libraries Supplement*. Unlike the American study, their inventory went beyond doctoral level study to include “all touristic dissertations produced at the postgraduate level” (Hall 1991: 520). The bulk of the twenty-eight dissertations they identified were produced for Masters degrees (86%), with only three PhDs and one Bachelor of Letters thesis identified for the period 1968-1988. They included basic bibliographic data such as the name of the author, year of submission/completion of thesis, title of thesis, type of degree, the institution awarding the degree and the subject heading for the thesis identified in the *Union List*. Hall and Pedrazzini used Jafari and Ascher’s definition of tourism (Jafari 1987: 158) for the purpose of identifying tourism-focused studies, being “the study of man (sic) away from his (sic) normal habitat, of the touristic apparatus and networks, and of the ordinary and nonordinary worlds and their dialectical relationship.” In his short analysis of the 1989 research, Hall reports that, like the Jafari and Ascher study, “the annual submission of tourism dissertations was highest in the late 1970s and in the mid-1980s” (pg. 521), which he attributes potentially to a greater emphasis paid to tourism within Australian society during this period and the development of tourism programs, particularly at postgraduate level, within Australian universities.

Two follow up studies by Meyer-Arendt (2005) and Laing and Weiler (2008) extended the analysis of Jafari and Ascher (1988) and Hall and Pedrazzini (1989) respectively, and in particular added another fifteen years of data to assess the postgraduate tourism output to date and to identify trends and gaps, particularly from a disciplinary, regional and topical perspective, as a basis for identifying potential future research opportunities. The

former study extended what Jafari and Ascher started, to include doctoral research in Canada as well as the U.S. Laing and Weiler (2008) followed the precedent set by Hall and Pedrazzini, to include both masters-level and doctoral research in their database.

The present study draws on data from this latter database to examine Asian-themed research undertaken by higher degree research students in Australian universities. For this reason, a more detailed description of the data sources and methods used to assemble this database are outlined in the methods section of this paper.

## **STUDY APPROACH, DATA SOURCES AND METHODS**

### ***Data sources and methods for assembling the database***

A database of 461 Australian PhD and Masters tourism-focused dissertations was constructed using information gained from Libraries Australia's *Australian National Bibliographic Database* (ANBD) supplemented by the *Australasian Digital Theses* (ADT) program database, both available online (Laing and Weiler, 2008). The ANBD and ADT databases include basic data such as the name of the student/author, title of the thesis, the institution which conferred the higher degree, the year the dissertation was submitted and key words. In some instances, additional information is provided, including a copy of the abstract and the school or department of the student. Searches of key words (hotel, hospitality, leisure, tourism, tourist, travel, tour, recreation, holiday, vacation, guide, trip and heritage) were used to isolate tourism-focused dissertations. This method approximated as far as possible the approach taken by Hall and Pedrazzini (1989), in their earlier study of Australian tourism-related higher degree dissertations.

Two independent researchers reviewed the database extracted from the ANBD and ADT databases, and only those entries that were identified as 'tourism-related' entries by both researchers were kept in the database used in this paper. The resultant database was then peer reviewed by 22 senior Australian tourism academics (nearly all at Professorial level), to ensure that the database was as comprehensive and accurate as possible (Laing and Weiler, 2008). The final result of this process was the database of 461 tourism-related theses.

### ***Methods for identifying Asian-themed dissertations***

Thesis titles, keywords and (where available) abstracts were used to determine the theme or themes of the dissertations. These were grouped into major categories and when appropriate, were listed in multiple categories. While it is legitimate to regard outbound travel from Asia as Asian tourism, Australian theses which analysed this component appeared to attack the topic from a source-market perspective. That is to say, such theses looked at Asia as a source market for Australia or other non-Asian destinations and as such, appeared to be more concerned with the benefits to those destination countries than to the Asian nations. Consequently, for the purposes of this paper, a thesis was deemed to have an *Asian theme* if its focus was on tourism in one or more Asian countries, excluding Asian outbound tourism to non-Asian destinations. Of the 461 tourism-related dissertations in the database, 70 theses (15%) were identified as fitting this criterion; all of these were single-country focused with the exception of one thesis that examined both an Asian country and an African country and two theses whose titles only indicated a focus on the Asian region or the Southeast Asian region as a whole. There were one or two instances of dissertations that looked at tourism from one Asian country to another.

These were deemed to be focussed on the destination, rather than the source country. The remainder of this paper is based exclusively on these 70 theses.

These 70 Asian-themed dissertations were also categorised by dissertation topic. In the absence of a ‘standard typology’ of tourism topics, an analysis of the most frequently observed topics was used to develop six categories plus a seventh ‘other’ category:

1. The *economics and supply-side research* category includes theses focused on economic impacts, economic development, economic forecasting/demand, specific industry sectors such as travel agencies and accommodation, and industry profiles.
2. The *marketing and demand-side research* category covers topics such as promotion and destination image, market segmentation (studies of specific market segments), consumer demand studies (expectations and satisfaction) and public relations.
3. The *nature-based, eco-tourism and environmental impacts* category includes topics of environmental concern related to tourism, including all forms of nature-based tourism and research on the environmental impacts of tourism.
4. The *socio-political impacts and community participation* category includes all impacts of a social and or political nature. Community participation is deemed to be a social impact and is included in this category.
5. The *planning, management and regulation* category includes mainly theses concerned with the role played by government in tourism, although any dissertation that includes keywords closely related to planning, management or regulation is included in this category.
6. The *education, training and support* category covers topics related to tourism education at the academic and industry level, tourism industry training and support programs designed to assist tourism operations.
7. The final category, labelled *other*, is used to cover all remaining topics that do not fit within the specialised categories listed above. This includes tourist attitudes/behaviour; authenticity and cultural tourism; health issues related to tourism; travel writing and travel guides; volunteering and charity related tourism, and two theses which focused on Asia but could not otherwise be classified.

Where it was deemed appropriate, theses were assigned to more than one category, resulting in a total of 88 classifications for the 70 theses. For example, a dissertation focusing on planning and management of a national park was classified within two categories: *planning, management and regulation* as well as *nature-based/ecotourism/environmental impacts*.

### ***Limitations***

It would be wrong to conclude that all Asian-themed theses completed in Australia were authored by international students from Asian countries, and even if they were, how

many of these students returned to their home country and took up work in tourism education and/or research are unknowns. An analysis of the ethnicity of the authors' names is reported in the results, but this too is inconclusive, as anecdotally a number of the authors are known to be Australian, one is known to be Kenyan and it is even possible that students' names could reflect the ethnicity of a parent or spouse rather than their own ethnicity. In other words, while the analysis of the subject-matter of the dissertations is accurate and therefore the contribution to knowledge about Asian tourism is unequivocal, the case for capacity-building in Asian tertiary institutions is less compelling.

At the same time, it could be argued that there are many Asian students who complete a postgraduate research qualification in Australia with a focus other than Asian tourism and return to their home country to work as tourism researchers and/or academics. This would include students who complete a non-tourism thesis on an Asian country, who in the process may well acquire research knowledge and skills that equip them for tertiary tourism teaching and research. It would also include students who study tourism but choose any number of topics for their dissertation other than Asian tourism. While both of these are beyond the scope of the present study, the reader is referred to Laing and Weiler (2008) for an analysis that incorporates the latter.

It should be noted that the ADT database has been in operation only since 2000 and while most theses appear on this database, submission of theses records by individual universities is voluntary and may be dependent on the allocation of funds to this task. Thus, the figures presented in this paper's results may understate the total number of dissertations and the bias resulting from the voluntary nature of submission to the dataset is unknown. Similarly, the ANBD is incomplete, particularly in regard to older theses and regional institutions who may not allocate enough resources to maintaining records. Despite these limitations, the databases represent the best available lenses, not only for viewing who has done masters and doctoral level research in tourism but also the extent of the research carried out on particular topics and where gaps appear in tourism-related research. Notwithstanding these limitations, this paper does provide insight into the Asian locations, disciplinary foci and topics that are and are not being investigated by postgraduate tourism research as well as trends over time.

## **RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS**

### ***Focus of research by geographic region***

The first finding of interest is based on an analysis of the regions of Asia that are and are not receiving attention by postgraduate tourism research students. Eighty-one percent (n=56) of the Asian focussed theses analysed tourism in just four countries. Thirty-one percent (n=22) looked at Thailand, 24% (n=17) at Indonesia, 13% (n=9) at Vietnam and 13% (n=8) at mainland China. Only one thesis was dedicated to Taiwanese tourism (treated separately here from China) and none studied the other Chinese capitalist provinces of Hong Kong and Macau. Intuitively, one might expect to see a correlation between the countries studied and patterns of international tourism. The picture in relation to postgraduate tourism research, however, is not so clear cut. Countries of focus may be influenced by government policies as much as by tourism patterns, particularly if many of the theses are written by international students. The prevalence of dissertations focussing on Thailand, for example, might be reflective of the importance that the Thai government places on tourism development. Chaisawat (2005) reported that Thailand's Ministry of Tourism and Sport developed a policy to position the country as Asia's centre

for tourism by 2007. It is not inconceivable that such an aim might have ramifications on education policy and student interests. While it is noted that this policy was constructed in 2004 and therefore would not have directly affected any of the dissertations in this study, tourism has been a significant and growing contributor to the Thai economy since the time of the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. This long relationship might have influenced many students to take up postgraduate tourism studies abroad. Relationships between governments and proximity between countries might also play a part in destination choices for overseas students. Thailand is a close neighbour of Australia and has been the recipient of considerable Australian aid, especially at the beginning of the Southeast Asian financial collapse in 1996. Thailand is also a popular destination for Australian tourists, further cementing the relationship and possibly placing the destination in the minds of Thai students.

Indonesia is also a popular destination for Australian tourists and is Australia's closest Asian neighbour. As with Thailand, Indonesia has received substantial levels of aid from Australia, including military aid and training. As will be discussed later, many of the theses that focus on Indonesia appear to have been written by non-Indonesian students and it is possible that Australian students, familiar with Indonesia through travel and news items or possibly even language studies at school would demonstrate a strong interest in the country. For Indonesian students wishing to study abroad, Australia would be an attractive choice due to proximity and familiarity.

As well as influencing the tourism industry of Thailand, the Vietnam War contributed to the displacement of South Vietnamese capitalists, resulting in significant refugee flows to Australia in the 1970s. The resultant diaspora community of Vietnamese Australians might account for the significant number of dissertations that focus on Vietnamese tourism. However, it should be noted that Vietnam has embraced market economics and has opened itself to tourism. The war created a relationship between the two countries that could well influence Vietnamese students to choose Australia as an educational destination.

It is significant that Australia gained approved destination status from China in 1999 and the two countries began forging a close relationship in the 1970s when the Whitlam Labor government became the first foreign government to recognise Beijing as the legitimate seat of power in China. In recent times China has replaced Japan as Australia's major trading partner as well as its fastest growing Asian tourism source market. Notwithstanding the fact that Chinese students appear to be more inclined to study in Britain than Australia (Rong, 2007), it is not surprising that China is now Australia's largest source market for higher degree students from Asia, followed by India and Malaysia (IDP, 2008).

*Focus of research with respect to discipline and major topic*

**Table 1. Topics of Asian Themed Theses (multiple category analysis)**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
Economics and supply-side research	22	26
Marketing and demand-side research	17	20
Nature-based, eco-tourism and environmental impacts	10	12
Socio-political impacts and community participation	9	10
Planning, management and regulation	8	9
Education, training and support	5	6
Other	15	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>100%</b>

As illustrated in Table 1, Asian-themed dissertations have largely concentrated on economics and marketing topics. These two areas accounted for 46% of all topics investigated. Twenty-six percent (n=22) were categorised as economics and supply-side research, with the largest number (n=8) looking at industry profiling or specific industry segments and five theses examining the economic impacts of tourism. Of the 17 theses that were categorised as marketing and demand-side research, the sub-topics of promotion, destination image and segmentation dominated.

The third most popular topic category was nature-based, eco-tourism and environmental impacts, which was examined by 12% of the dissertations (n=10). Almost as many (n=9) studied socio-political impacts and community participation. Planning, management and regulation topics represented 9% of the Asian-themed theses (n=8) while education, training and support topics were studied by 6% (n=5).

The remaining 17% (n=15) of the dissertations attracted other topics, the most popular being authenticity and cultural tourism, tourist attitudes and behaviour, and volunteering and charity-related tourism. There were, of course, many topics that were not addressed at all, and these are discussed under “gaps” in the final section of this paper.

Thirty-six of the 70 dissertations identified as having an Asian theme contained information regarding the department, school or faculty in which the dissertation was completed. Not surprisingly, a strong correlation exists between the school and the dissertation topic, although marketing and economics topics were, at times, tackled by students in areas such as the social sciences and politics. Even so, it appears that the topic studied in tourism theses is strongly influenced by the school or department in which the thesis is completed.

The under-emphasis on certain areas in favour of business and particularly economics and marketing topics may be due to many factors including student interest, students’ perceptions of the relative merits of particular topics in relation to future employment opportunities, the perceived ease of accessing data (Rong, 2007), how higher degree programs are marketed and targeted scholarship programs such as AusAID.



The emphasis on particular topic areas, to some extent, varied for each of the countries featured in the dissertations. For example, no theses examined marketing issues for China, Tibet, Korea, Malaysia or Brunei. Of the eight theses dedicated to Chinese tourism, six examined economic issues, with the majority of these concentrating on specific industry sectors or whole industry profiles. Only one China-focused thesis examined environmental impacts or nature-based tourism and one examined education, training and support. This emphasis on the economic and supply-side aspects of tourism is consistent with the recent economic growth of China, with tourism very much at the early stages of the tourism lifecycle, when there tends to be much interest in growing the industry and less in planning, regulating and minimising negative impacts. This supply-side bias is also evident in China's tourism education (Xiao, 1999) which may well influence the topic choices of Chinese (and for that matter Tibetan) postgraduate research students abroad. The same may also be true for Korea, Malaysia and Brunei.

Indonesia, Malaysia and India were the only countries to be examined by postgraduate research theses in relation to authenticity or cultural tourism. This may be due to the fact that these are prime destinations for Australians travelling to Asia, so perhaps the relevant Australian thesis supervisors would have been more familiar with and appreciative of the cultural appeal of these countries to overseas tourists. The Indian themed dissertations (n=3) were varied, including topics relating to authenticity/cultural tourism, travel writing, volunteering and market segmentation/profiling.

***Growth and trends over time***

The first Asian-themed dissertation identified by this study was completed in 1984, sixteen years after the first tourism-related thesis was completed in Australia. This first thesis studied the training of Chinese tour guides and was followed by two theses in 1985, one of which looked at tourist behaviour in Japan and the other at education and training in Indonesia. No further Asian-themed dissertations were completed until 1988, when the first of the economics-focused theses appeared.

**Figure 1. Asian Themed Dissertation Completions - 1984-2005**

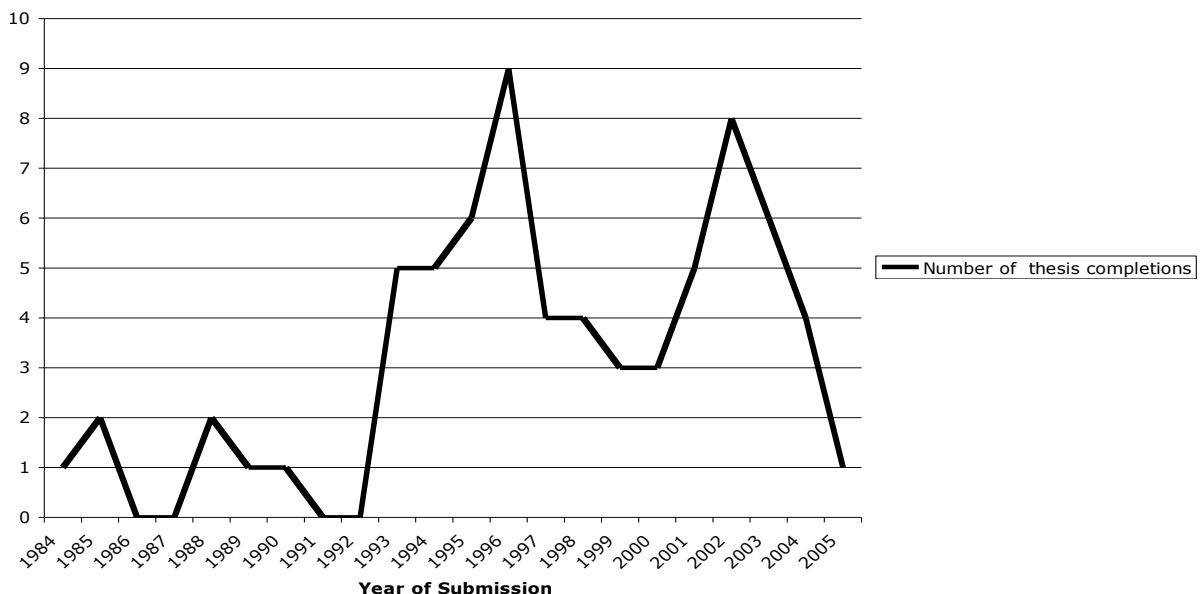


Figure 1 depicts the uneven growth of Asian-themed tourism dissertations over the 18-year period covered by the database. Given Jafari and Asher's (1988) observation regarding the discontinuous growth of dissertation submissions in the U.S., the sporadic growth in Asian-themed tourism dissertations in Australia is not unexpected. While not illustrated in the graph, there have also been shifts in topic foci over time: the focus on economics and marketing shifted to mainly an economic focus in the late 1990s and then was replaced by an interest in nature-based tourism and environmental impacts in the period 1999-2001, followed by a return to a marketing and economic focus.

The discontinuous growth periods and the ebb and flow of topic areas generally and for particular countries may be due to a wide range of factors. The slight downturn in Asian theses during the 1999-2001 period might be explained by the South East Asian economic crisis of 1996, although this did follow a more dramatic decline between 1996 and 1997. Given that doctoral theses take a minimum of three years to complete and masters theses a minimum of two, there should be a lag period of at least this magnitude between an economic downturn and a reduced completion rate of dissertations. Although the reduction in completions was slight, it is notable that while the period 1996-1998 featured primarily South East Asian themes, in 1999 and 2000 only one thesis explored a South East Asian country. This suggests the likelihood of a high correlation between the countries studied and the nationality of the author, a point returned to in the next section of this paper. The contention gains further support through an analysis of the 2002-2003 period, which saw a large increase in the completion of Asian themed theses. Of the eight dissertations completed in 2002, seven were studies of South East Asian countries, with three of these being studies of Thailand, the first of the South East Asian economies to experience an economic downturn in 1996. Five of the seven South East Asian dissertations explored marketing or economics themes.

#### ***Analysis of the ethnicity of the authors of Asian-themed tourism theses***

It is notable that many of the Asian-themed theses were authored by people with Asian names. Moreover, there was a high correlation between the ethnic origins of the names and the countries studied, with one notable exception being that almost as many Indonesia-focused dissertations were written by non-Asian named authors as by Asian named authors (7:8). As mentioned earlier, this may be reflective of the popularity of Indonesia as a destination for Australians travelling to Asia as well as the general interest that Australia's nearest Asian neighbour attracts from Australian students. While the residency status of master's and PhD students was not available for this study, it seems reasonable to conclude that many or even most of these Asian-themed dissertations were written by international students from Asia. The decision to focus one's research on one's home country would be logical for reasons of familiarity, interest, ease of access to data, fieldwork costs and logistics, and the enhancement of job prospects upon returning to Asia. Moreover, as outlined earlier, the alignment of research output and topics with socio-demographic trends and economic events in Asia lends some support to the contention that the authors were, for the most part, international students.

A second possibility is that Asian-themed dissertations are undertaken by Australian students of Asian descent or those who have recently migrated to Australia. Interest and familiarity with the culture would favour such a decision. This would mean that the dissertation adds to the knowledge base of Asian tourism, but does not necessarily contribute to building capacity in these countries.

In summary, as noted under limitations, convergence between the ethnicity of the author's name and the focus of their thesis does not indicate the student's nationality nor their intention to live and work in the country they studied. Notwithstanding this limitation, there is a high correlation between country of interest and the ethnicity of the author, and a greater-than-average chance that the thesis was completed by an international student from the country under study. The veracity of the contention could be tested with further research.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

### ***Gaps in the research***

Notably absent or severely under represented among the Asian-themed theses were topics related to social issues, cultural and indigenous tourism, information technology, legal issues/risk management, political and regulatory environments, crime, security and religious tourism. While 10 of the theses did look at nature-based tourism or environmental issues, none appeared to study the impacts of global warming, despite climate change having been a topic in scientific circles since at least the 1970s. This is perhaps unsurprising since climate change is a more recent topic among the general community, and many government bodies have only begun to accept the importance of the issue since the Bali summit of 2007.

As mentioned earlier, the discipline (department, school or faculty) in which the dissertation was completed can have a strong influence on the topic studied. This goes some way toward explaining the lack of dissertations tackling issues such as information technology and health. It does not, however, explain why researchers of Asian tourism do not engage with, or enrol in, these other disciplines. In their comprehensive inventory of tourism dissertations completed in Australia, Laing and Weiler (2008) found a much wider range of topics than in the present review of Asian-themed research. It is possible that the multi-disciplinary nature of the tourism industry is not yet fully appreciated among student researchers of Asia. It is also possible that business and marketing related topics are seen by Asian international students as providing better employment prospects than are studies of social issues. A third possibility is that business and economics disciplines require a lesser command of the English language than do topics such as medicine, education or women's studies, and therefore hold greater appeal for international students from non English speaking backgrounds. These contentions are supported in the literature (Rong, 2007). Interestingly, Nield (2007) raised the argument that Hong Kong students undertaking distance learning courses in hospitality, provided by a British university, were strategic in their study approach. In other words they only engaged in that part of the curriculum that was directly assessable. While the paper does not attempt to contrast this with Western students' approaches, the contention is that Chinese students take a narrower approach to study than do Westerners. If this is so, it may help to explain the tendency for Asian students to choose business-related topics. Capacity building in fields other than business and economics may also be constrained by Asian education systems. Several studies suggest that Asian tourism education is business oriented and that Asian governments see tourism largely as an economic development tool (Craig-Smith & Fagence, 1995; Craig-Smith and Cooper, 2003; Ernawati and Pearce, 2003; Pearce 2007; Aramberri and Liang, 2007). Such approaches are likely to influence students' choices of research topics when they progress to master's and PhD studies although, despite the desire for broader research training among Asian tourism academics (Zhang, Lam and Bauer, 2001) care needs to be taken to avoid exporting,

possibly ill suited western educational methods to Asia (Craig-Smith and Cooper, 2003; Pearce 2007).

### ***Recommendations and conclusions***

Like the tourism dissertation studies that have preceded it, this study has revealed a sporadic but generally positive growth in the completion rate of theses. Similarly, the most popular countries of focus and topics have shown great variability throughout the study period. Overall, Thailand has been the most commonly investigated country followed by Indonesia, Vietnam and mainland China and the most common topics have fallen into the economics and marketing areas. The influences that drive such foci appear to be manifold and complex and include government policies, international relationships, geographic proximity, the ethnicity of authors and the existence of diaspora communities in Australia. Topics seem to be influenced by the discipline in which the dissertation is undertaken, student interests, perceived employment pathways and ease of data access. The manner in which degrees are marketed, targeted scholarship programs and the educational practices in Asian countries, also appear to be important.

That Asian-themed dissertations completed in Australia, are business and economics focussed at the expense of social issues, IT and health, has implications for the tourism knowledge base that is being developed in Asian countries. It can also be argued that there are consequences for the building of tertiary research and educational capacity in Asian countries, in producing tourism academics who may have limited capacity to teach and research in any depth outside their immediate field of expertise (being largely in business and particularly in marketing and economics). Thus the challenge in the first instance may be to find ways to develop interest and motivation among Asian students to undertake research in some of the gap areas identified in this study. In addition, Non Government Organisations, Australian scholarship providers and foreign governments might need to take a broader approach to the sponsorship of students, thereby encouraging the study of non business-related topics. There might also be some value in universities addressing the issue of English language skills among Asian international students. Through skill development and support, students might be more willing to tackle research in the humanities and the social sciences. It is also recommended, as noted by Chernish and Spivack (1998), that there is a need for more collaboration between tourism academics and colleagues in other disciplines including the supervision and support of international research students. Such tactics and considerations could be central to creating a more balanced cadre of Asian tourism researchers and educators who can provide academic and research leadership in their home countries.

### **REFERENCES**

ADT *Australasian Digital Theses Program*, accessed 30 September 2006.

<<http://adt.caul.edu.au/>>

ANBD *Australian National Bibliographic Database* accessed 30 September 2006

<<http://www.nla.gov.au/librariesaustralia/>>

Aramberri, J. & Liang, C. (2007) 'The Scissors Crisis in Tourism Studies' *Journal of Teaching in Travel and Tourism* 7(1), 25-43.

- Chaisawat, M. (2005) 'Travel and Tourism Education in Thailand' *Journal of Teaching and Travel in Thailand* 5(3) 197-224.
- Chernish, W.N. & Spivack, S.E. (1998) 'Assessing the Need for Mutual Understanding: Health Education for Tourism Educators and Tourism Education for Health Educators' *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* 3(1). 45-54.
- Craig-Smith, S. & Fagence, M. (1995) 'Tourism Training Needs in the Asia Pacific Region' *Annals of Tourism Research* 22(3), 703-704
- Craig-Smith, S. & Cooper, C. (2003) 'Future Directions for Tourism Education in Southeast Asia' *ASEAN Journal on Hospitality and Tourism* 2(1), 71-77.
- Ernawati, D.B. & Pearce, P.L. (2003) 'Tourism Courses at the Higher Education Level in Indonesia: The Perspectives of the Stakeholders' *Journal of Teaching in Travel and Tourism* 3(2), 1-18.
- Hall, C. M. (1991). 'Tourism as the Subject of Post-Graduate Dissertations in Australia' *Annals of Tourism Research*, 18(3), 520-523.
- Hall, C.M. & Pedrazzini, T. (1989). *Australian Higher Degree Theses in Tourism, Recreation and Related Subjects, Occasional Paper No. 2*. Lismore: Australian Institute of Tourism Industry Management, University of New England, Northern Rivers.
- IDP Education Pty Ltd. *Higher Education: International Students in Australian Higher Education*, accessed 4 February 2008  
<<http://www.idp.com/research/fastfacts/article406.asp>>
- Jafari, J. & Ascher, D. (1988). 'Tourism as the Subject of Doctoral Dissertations' *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15(3), 407-429.
- Laing, J. and Weiler, B. (2008). 'Postgraduate Tourism Research in Australia: A Trend Analysis of 1969 to 2005'. *Where the Bloody Hell Are We? Proceedings of the 2002 International Research Conference of the Council for Australian University Tourism and Hospitality Education (CAUTHE)*, Gold Coast, 11-14 February, 2008.
- Meyer-Arendt, K.J. & Justice, C. (2002) 'Tourism as the Subject of North American Doctoral Dissertations 1987-2000' *Annals of Tourism Research* 29(4) 1171-1174.
- Pearce, P.L (2007) 'Asian Tourism Educators: Views of Their Employment and Possibilities for Interaction with Industry' *Journal of Teaching in Travel and Tourism* 7(1), 63-76.
- Rong, H. (2007) 'A Challenging but Worthwhile Learning Experience! Asian International Student Perspectives of Undertaking a Dissertation in the UK' *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education* 6(1) 29-38.
- Spear, H. J. (2007) 'Nursing Theory and Knowledge Development: A Descriptive Review of Doctoral Dissertations, 2000-2004' *Advances in Nursing Science* 30(1), E1-E14

Tran, T. L. (2008) 'Unpacking Academic Practices: International Students in Management and Education Disciplines.' *Higher Education Research and Development* (acceptance date: February 25, 2007) IN PRESS.

Xiao, H. (1999) 'Tourism Education in China: Past and Present' *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* 4(2), 68-72.

Zhang, H; Lam, T. & Bauer, T. (2001) 'Analysis of Training and Education Needs of Mainland Chinese Tourism Academics in the Twenty First Century' *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 13(6), 274-279